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SUBJECT: GOC TAKES SOUNDINGS ON ELN PEACE TALKS

REF: A. 07 BOGOTA 8518; B. 09 BOGOTA 3145

CLASSIFIED BY: William R. Brownfield, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

11. (S) The Government of Colombia (GOC) and National Liberation Army (ELN) continue to flirt with an official peace process but are far from taking concrete steps to initiate talks. Former National Liberation Army (ELN) peace negotiator Francisco Galan initiated an "exploration" of renewed peace talks after the previous process collapsed in early 2008. The Government of Colombia (GOC) says it remains in "listening mode" with the ELN in hope that movement on an ELN peace agreement will further isolate the larger Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The Catholic Church remains skeptical that any progress is possible in the short-term. Post sees little way ahead until after the May presidential elections, which will change the political and military situation for all involved actors. End Summary.

A NEW ROUND OF TALKS?

12. (C) Former ELN member and peace negotiator Francisco Galan told Pol Chief on October 9 that he was encouraged by initial conversations with the GOC and ELN on a new proposal to explore the renewal of peace talks that stalled in early 2008 (ref A). Galan said he had proposed four conditions for the dialogue. First, that the talks would remain secret. Second, in keeping with the first condition, neither side would attempt to use the talks for political purposes. Third, that a permanent communication channel would be established to maintain fluidity in the dialogue. Fourth, that the ELN negotiators would have freedom of mobility -- a contentious point during previous rounds. Galan said he remained hopeful that these conditions, if found acceptable, could serve as a basis for a new round. Galan claimed to have discussed this proposal with High Commissioner for Peace Frank Pearl, Vice President Francisco Santos and First Lady Lina Moreno de Uribe.

¶3. (S) Although High Commissioner for Peace Frank Pearl denied any new developments with the ELN to Pol Chief on September 17, Pearl's Deputy Alejandro Eder told Pol Chief October 26 that Pearl had, in fact, authorized Galan to test COCE's willingness to talk. Eder said the initiative had been going on for months but claimed the GOC was still in "listening mode." He was encouraged by messages on the ELN website (www.eln-voces.com) that referred to a political solution to the Colombian conflict. He noted that the October 7 jailbreak of former ELN commander Carlos Marin Guarin, aka "Pablito," would complicate efforts, but thought it was surmountable. Eder cautioned that the ELN do not fully trust Galan but that their estimation of him was good enough for Galan to make preliminary inquiries. Eder said the GOC was considering one or two third parties to accompany a peace process. They had ruled out the Cubans, Brazilians, or any other Latin American government because "they talk too much," he said.

¶4. (S) Eder said the GOC was taking the long view by leveraging an ELN peace agreement to induce the FARC into talks. If the FARC perceived that the ELN had achieved some political success via a negotiation, Eder theorized, it might give them incentive to dialogue as well. Eder cautioned, however, that "nothing was

imminent" by way of a breakthrough with either the ELN or FARC. Both the FARC and ELN are awaiting the May 2010 election results before committing to a course of action, he added. Eder suggested that if President Uribe were successful in winning a third term, both terrorist organizations might be more willing to negotiate as they are painfully aware of Uribe's tough stance on security. Eder asked hypothetically what role the United States would be willing to play should the GOC succeed in initiating a peace process over the next two to three years.

THE SKEPTICAL CHURCH

¶5. (C) On October 15, Catholic Church peace negotiator Father Dario Echeverri told us he doubted that Galan had made as much headway as he claimed. Echeverri said his sources, mostly priests in ELN-dominated areas, had not reported any new willingness on the part of the COCE to talk. Echeverri commented on the FARC-ELN rivalry that had at times flared into open conflict. He said the FARC routinely opposed ELN peace talks, claiming they were a GOC effort to "paramilitarize" the ELN and employ them against the FARC.

COMMENT: NO PROGRESS IN SHORT-RUN

¶6. (C) We share the Church's skepticism about whether the ELN really wants to negotiate with the GOC. The ELN is highly fractured, partially degraded into a narco-trafficking gang, and still seduced by hopes of intervention by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. We do not foresee either the GOC or ELN taking any dramatic steps toward peace until after next year's elections.

BROWNFIELD